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Stoker, W.

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# The Place of Art in Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

Wessel Stoker

Kierkegaard discusses art in very different ways. He is frequently critical of it and argues that it cannot represent life properly. Is he hostile towards art and the aesthetic—a Protestant who does not see much value in art? Bahr argued that, according to Kierkegaard, one must make a mutually exclusive choice between the aesthetic and the Christian faith, thus breaking the connection between art and religion (Bahr 1965: 198, 204). In the current literature on Kierkegaard, Pattison speaks of the “the negative implications of Kierkegaard’s work for aesthetics” (Pattison 1992: x).

Despite these critical remarks on art, Kierkegaard does not reject art—something that Pattison does recognize implicitly when he points out that Kierkegaard, in the context of the communication of the Christian message, provides a Christian rhetoric. Moreover, Kierkegaard liked writing reviews of literature and plays and was himself a great man of letters. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) Climacus remarks that the poetic must be maintained in life if human existence is to be genuinely human (CUP 1992: 348).

Primarily because of recent studies, there has been a revaluation of Kierkegaard’s view of art and the aesthetic. Gouwens’ study (1989) does not explicitly explore Kierkegaard’s relationship to art but contribute to this by pointing to the important place of the imagination in his thought. Walsh’s study, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* and Erne’s *Lebenskunst: Aneignung Ästhetischer Erfahrung* both appeared in 1994. They both argued, independently of each other, that Kierkegaard included the aesthetic in his religious ethical view of life. He borrows from Romantic aesthetics—which he for the rest criticizes—the view that life should be a work of art. His existential aesthetics is about “living poetically.” The question is: What is the place of art in this aesthetics?

As an alternative to Romantic aesthetics, Kierkegaard provides an aesthetics from both the perspective of a ethical view of life and from the Christian perspective. The former is presented under a pseudonym so that it will be clear that it is not his own view. For the sake of brevity, we will speak of ethical and theological aesthetics, keeping in mind that Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms did not provide a full-fledged aesthetics but only occasional remarks on aesthetics. Unlike Erne (1994: 81-123), I thus distinguish between the ethical aesthetics of the pseudonym B in *Either/Or* (1843) and Kierkegaard’s theological aesthetics. “Ethical aesthetics” here means the view of life formulated in the ethical stage and “theological aesthetics” refers to aesthetics that emerges from Kierkegaard’s Christian view of life.

I will show that imagination and appropriation are core concepts in both forms of aesthetics but that Kierkegaard’s view of radical transcendence—the qualitative distinction between God and human beings—is the norm only for his theological aesthetics. We will first look at how

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to J. Taels for his comments on an earlier version of this article.

Kierkegaard presents his existential aesthetics in his *The Concept of Irony* (1841) as an alternative to Romantic aesthetics. This view is developed further by B in the second part of *Either/Or* as an ethical aesthetics and by Kierkegaard himself as a theological aesthetics, primarily in his *Practice in Christianity* (1850). For reasons of space, I will limit myself to the works cited with references to other works.<sup>2</sup>

### *Romantic Aesthetics and an Alternative*

In his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, the young Kierkegaard criticizes the Romantic aesthetics of poets and novelists like Schlegel, Thieck and Solger who see reality as empty and meaningless. That view is expressed in the Romantic irony that entails “infinite, absolute negativity” (CI 1989: 271). In order to be able to survive and function in a meaningless world, the Romanticist creates a reality for himself, separate from the existing reality.

Irony now functioned as that for with nothing was established, as that which was finished with everything, and also as that which had the absolute power to do everything. If it allowed something to remain established, it knew that it had the power to destroy it, knew it at the very same moment it let it continue. If it posited something, it knew it had the authority to annul it, knew it at the very same moment it posited it. (CI: 275-76)

For this irony the Romanticists cited above relied on Fichte’s view of the creating I that can construct a world in an omnipotent way (CI: 273-74). Historical reality is thus reduced to possibility. In the reality created by the imagination itself everything is possible, with the result that people do not have to bear responsibility for it (CI: 279-82). In this way the Romantic writer sketches the requirement of the irony of “living poetically” (CI: 280). As an example of this sketch, Kierkegaard discusses Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde* (CI: 289-301).

Romantic aesthetics is an existential aesthetics: what is required is not only that the writer or poet makes his product but also that he himself lives poetically. Living poetically, therefore, is not only a matter of fiction but also something that is to be realized in everyday life. Thus, the main character in Schlegel’s *Lucinde*, Julius, is described as follows:

Just as his artistic ability developed and he was able to achieve with ease what he had been unable to accomplish with all his powers of exertion and hard work before, so too his life now came to be a work of art for him, imperceptibly, without his knowing how it happened. A light entered his soul: he saw and surveyed all the parts of his life and the structure of the whole clearly and truly because he stood at its center. (Schlegel 1971: 102)

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<sup>2</sup> For an extensive discussion of all works that bear on Kierkegaard’s aesthetics see Walsh (1992).

Kierkegaard provides an alternative for this Romantic, existential aesthetics. He brings the illusory, possible reality back to the actual world and places living poetically within an ethical-religious or, more specifically, Christian framework. The ideal does not lie in the possible, in the imaginative world of the poet or artist, but in actual life. Living poetically should be something for every person, not only for the poet (CI: 325-326). The concept of humanity is decisive. The human being does not, as Romanticists believe, create himself but develops within a reality that is both gift and task:

[It] is indeed one thing to compose oneself poetically; it is something else to be composed poetically. The Christian lets himself be poetically composed, and in this respect a simple Christian lives far more poetically than many a brilliant intellectual. (CI: 280-81)

The Romantic view of art makes the world more beautiful than it is and attempts to reconcile the human being with existing reality by denying its imperfection. In that way the human being does not, according to Kierkegaard, become reconciled with the reality in which he lives but merely creates an illusory, better world. Infinity is placed outside human beings as an external infinity. According to Kierkegaard, the alternative is an ethical or Christian view of living poetically in which infinity is interiorized. He agrees with the Romantic view that “to live poetically, then, is to live infinitely” (CI: 297) but replaces external infinity (the illusory world) with internal infinity.

The person who wants to enjoy infinitely poetically does indeed have an infinity before him, but it is an external infinity, because in my enjoying, I am continually outside myself in that other something. But an infinity such as that must cancel itself. Only when I in my enjoying am not outside myself but am inside myself, only then is my enjoyment infinite, because it is inwardly infinite. (CI: 297).

We will see below what he understands by internal infinity. A genuine living poetically does not presuppose an aesthetic self but an ethical or religious one. The Romantic irony that creates an illusory world and thus distances itself from daily life is replaced by the irony of the ethical human being who points to the movement of the infinite in the interiority of the human being who recognizes his absolute duty (CUP: 503). The ironist relativizes what makes the finite special in the light of the infinite ethical demand (CUP: 502v.).<sup>3</sup>

### *Ethical Aesthetics in Either/Or*

From the Romantics Kierkegaard takes existential aesthetics as he outlined it in his *The Concept of Irony* and in the first part of *Either/Or*. But he changes its content in two ways: through the anonymous writer B in part two of *Either/Or* with an ethical aesthetics and by the theological aesthetics of Kierkegaard himself. Here we are concerned with the former. Kierkegaard

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<sup>3</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* speaks of the irony of the ethical human being differently from how *The Concept of Irony* speaks of it (Walsh: 210-11).

wrote *Either/Or* under the pseudonym Victor Eremita who had found A and B's manuscripts in a secret drawer in an antique desk. In two letters B, the interpreter of the ethical view of life, argues against A the aesthete who had sketched Romantic aesthetics via the topic of love. B holds that the aesthetic comes to light better in the ethical view of life than in the Romantic view, according to which the aesthetic is an immediate sensual pleasure and sensual beauty. To get a good understanding of B's ethical aesthetics, let us look first at his concept of humanity.

Being human rests on a choice, B writes to A. The aesthetic sphere of life does not contain a choice of any kind. The human being is "immediate," as A had shown by the example of Don Juan who acts on the basis of his urges. The aesthetic human being can also be "reflexive," as is apparent from John the Seducer's diary which A had found.<sup>4</sup> John attempts to seduce a girl with a clever plan whose goal is to conquer the girl rather than to start a permanent relationship with her. An actual self is lacking in both Don Juan and John because they lack the will to decide (SD1980: 29). According to B, the aesthete A wears a mask because he is nothing; he is constantly alone but in relationships with others (EOII: 159). Life is a fairy tale for A; he hovers above himself and his life is an expression of despair. B writes to A:

You continually hover above yourself, but the higher atmosphere, the more refined sublimate, into which you are vaporized, is the nothing of the despair, and you see down below you a multiplicity of subjects, insights, studies, and observations that nevertheless have no reality for you .... (EOII: 198)

To free himself from the aesthetic sphere of life A must make a choice. It is precisely by choosing despair that he is able to free himself from his despair and choose a certain view of life such as what B means by the term eternal validity:

Choose despair, then, because despair itself is a choice, because one can doubt [*tvivle*] without choosing it, but one cannot despair [*fortvivle*] without choosing it. And in despairing a person chooses again, and what then does he choose? He chooses himself, not in his immediacy, not as this accidental individual but he chooses himself in his *eternal validity*. (EOII 211; italics mine)

Kierkegaard views the self of the human being as a synthesis in which the opposition of eternal and temporal, of infinite and finite, of necessity and freedom is maintained and concretized. This human structure should be realized substantively by every human being, be it ethically or religiously.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there is also an ethical shape to the human structure but this does not yet rest on a choice, as we saw. B thus distinguishes between the actual

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<sup>4</sup> The term aesthetic also applies to Hegel's philosophy because his system is not concerned with human existence (CUP: 117-120).

<sup>5</sup> The ethicist is also religious, as B himself shows. The term "religious" refers here to what is called paradoxal religiosity (religion B) in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the Christian faith as Kierkegaard understands it.

self and the ideal self (EOII: 259). How can we develop into the ideal self? It is in that connection that we encounter the concept “imagination” in Kierkegaard's writings. The term is a key term in Kierkegaard's anthropology, even more important than feeling, knowing and willing. It is not merely a term having to do with artistic production—it is also the medium for developing the ideal self (Gouwens 1989: 205). In *The Sickness unto Death* this is stated as follows:

As a rule, imagination is the medium for the process of infinitizing; it is not a capacity, as are the others ... it is the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]. When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, and willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that person reflects himself- that is upon imagination. (SD 30-31)

The ideal self that B forms in his imagination is the ethical self, which views life as a life of duty, of general moral rules. The most central point of this ethics is the call to realize within oneself the universal, most fundamental possibilities of being human. “The person who views life ethically sees the universal, and the person who lives ethically expresses the universal in his life” (EOII: 256). B shows A that the aesthetic is served better in the ethical life than in the Romantic life of sensual pleasure in a dream world, as sketched by A. A has to make a life choice, whereby the ethical is not denied but can be brought to clarity. He must therefore undergo a development by which the aesthetic is not destroyed but transfigured (EOII: 253). B demonstrates this by means of the themes of love and beauty.

B raises the aesthetic of romantic love to the level of marital love. The latter can ennoble the “first love” as described by A via a comedy by Scribe, by taking it up into a “higher, concentric immediacy” (EOII: 29) or, formulated in a less Hegelian way, marriage is “the radiant transfiguration of the first love” (EOII: 31).

The aesthetic is deepened in marriage by the fact that sensuality is linked with spirit, with a spiritual aspect in the love relationship (EOII: 60). For A, “infinity” was the momentary character of romantic love; for B, “infinity” is the marriage relationship that has an “internal history” (EOII: 134). In marriage the husband and wife enter into such a history (EOII: 96-97). The evaluation of time and of repetition is thus different. The aesthete loathes repetition, which he finds boring, a matter of habit. He seeks change, like Don Juan or like the English tourist who is continually visiting different places. Or he limits himself to crop rotation on the same plot of ground—through which the trivial becomes amusing. Here time is a series of “now” moments, whereas in marriage time is reevaluated by preserving eternity in time (EOII: 138). There is mention of an (internal) history because a couple begins and maintains a long-lasting relationship together. There is thus a “movement” (EOII: 96), development and the posing of a goal, a term that, as we will see, is also important in connection with the beautiful.

In addition to imagination, one of the key terms in Kierkegaard's aesthetics is *appropriation*. These obtain not only for the Christian faith (EOII: 97) but also for life in general. B points out that predicates of love such as faithfulness, steadiness, meekness, patience, etc. must be

appropriated by the individual inwardly (EOII: 139-40). They need to be repeated daily. In repetition reality is raised to an ideal and then the possibility is repeated in actual reality. Such a repetition makes use of the imagination to undo imbalances and diffidences in the human being himself (Gouwens 1989: 206). Marriage is thus sensual but at the same time spiritual, free but necessary, absolute in itself and as a moral duty pointing to God (EOII: 62). B does not lose sight of the fact that the aesthetic has to do with beauty. He praises the beauty of marriage to which the sensual beauty of romantic love pales in comparison. Therefore, we must say more about how B views beauty.

Like A, B describes beauty as teleology in itself. He does criticize A for not attributing any movement to this. "If there is to be any question of teleology, there must be a movement, for as soon as I think of a goal, I think of movement ..." (EOII: 274). B connects beauty as internal teleology not so much with a material work of art as with human existence because it has movement in the sense of becoming-in-freedom (EOII: 274). B thus applies beauty to human life and uses marriage as an example of the beautiful life. He also calls marriage an internal harmony whose teleology is self-contained (EOII: 62). Moreover, movement, an internal history, belongs to marriage. Here living poetically has to do with ethical existence. If the human being lives in an ethical way, beauty can be seen (EOII: 275). Marriage is the "truly poetic" (EOII: 96).

What is aesthetically beautiful must not be confused with what is *depicted* as aesthetically beautiful in art. The question is if art can portray beauty properly. B has this depend on the view of life: if life is viewed ethically, then art falls short of being able to portray its beauty. Art is concerned with a concentration in the moment (EOII: 133). The problem is that art cannot do full justice to the time of the "internal history," the "movement" (EOII: 134-37). And that is what precisely what belongs to beauty as internal teleology. The depiction does not work in music, which has the element of time, because it does not have any permanence. Poetry does the most justice to time, but poetry cannot express the succession of time either. B does hold that romantic love is portrayed well—after all, this love has to do with the moment—but that is not the case with respect to marital love which occurs anew every day. The aesthetic is thus incommensurable with poetic depiction. But how is it then portrayed? B's answer is: through being lived (EOII: 137). The depiction of the aesthetic happens here through people living it in actual life.

B thus presents to A an existential aesthetics of living poetically that is different from the Romantic one presented by A. For B as well, life is beautiful, but it is now viewed as beautiful from the ethical perspective (EOII: 271, 275). In *Repetition* (1843) Constantin confirms that life is beautiful because of repetition (R 1983:132). It is not the world that the Romantic poet himself has imagined that is beautiful but the actual reality of the human being, his marriage, his work and friendship—matters that to which the aesthete does not grant high priority. Imagination and appropriation are necessary to give form to such an existential aesthetics.

B presents an existential aesthetics that sees the ethical life as a work of art. The aesthetic is primarily a matter of life itself and seems to have less to do with art and poetry. We should thus provide a short explanation of the terms aesthetic and aesthetics.

The term aesthetics (1) was first used by A.G. Baumgarten (1714-1762) to indicate a separate philosophical discipline and referred not only to art, beauty in art or the experience of beauty in general but also to the whole area of sensory knowledge. The Greek term *aisthesis* means sensory perception or sensation. Thus, aesthetics includes both natural beauty as well as beauty in works of art.

A views the aesthetic literally as the immediately sensory or, more specifically, as sensual pleasure and beauty. He and Romanticism generally view aesthetics as existential aesthetics (2). B agrees with this view of the aesthetic as existential aesthetics but looks at it ethically. The aesthetic is not so much beauty in art as the ethically pure life. The material work of art does fall short with respect to the reproduction of the ethical life but is not rejected as such. This is apparent from yet another use of the term aesthetics.

Aesthetics (3) as the study of the elements of style and articulation such as composition, design and transference. Both A and B opt for aesthetic form. In part 1 of *Either/Or* A uses different genres such as the aphorism, the essay and the diary by John the Seducer he found to demonstrate the Romantic aesthetic. B employs the literary genre of the letter, in which B as writer meets the aesthetic criteria that Kierkegaard had set for writers. In his *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838), a review of Hans Christian Andersen's *Only a Fiddler*, Kierkegaard had connected literature and ethics, demanding that a novelist have a certain education (*Bildung*) (EPW1990: 70-71) which the Romantic writer Andersen did not have. The novelist was also to have a view of life based on life choices, secular or religious in orientation (EPW: 73-74).<sup>6</sup> B met both requirements as the writer of both letters to A.

In short, in Kierkegaard's writings the term aesthetics is used in two ways: as existential aesthetics (as Romantic, ethical aesthetics and, as we will see, also in the Christian sense) and as a study of the style and elements of expression.

Kierkegaard published *Either/Or* under a pseudonym. Kierkegaard used this technique as an indirect method of communication. He used aesthetic forms of literature, as a result of which it seemed as if he was an aesthetic or ethical writer whereas in fact he was a religious writer. He worked in this way because, as a teacher, he wanted to communicate on the student's level. That is his indirect way of communicating (PV; CUP). He did publish religious writings like *Christian Discourses* (1848) under his own name and in them communicated "directly" with his readers.<sup>7</sup>

There are similarities between the ethical aesthetics of B and the theological aesthetics of Kierkegaard. Imagination and appropriation are

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<sup>6</sup> I am following Walsh's analysis here (Walsh 1994: 32-41).

<sup>7</sup> See Walsh 1994: 10-15 and Pattison 1992: 63-94.



important for both. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard did not share B's existential aesthetics. The difference lay in their different views of life. B is the interpreter of the bourgeois individual's existence of fulfilling the duties of society and choosing what is universally valid (EOII: 328). He lives the ideal of Kantian ethics, of the human being who must realize himself, although he does endorse the virtue ethics tradition in working out this Kantian ethics further. His own self is the goal for which he strives (EOII: 274).

At the conclusion of *Either/Or* the qualitative difference between God and human beings is stated by the minister from Jutland. He uses the genre of the sermon and appeals to the reader to appropriate the truth: "only the truth that builds up is truth for you" (EOII: 354). We will see that this *radical transcendence*—or qualitative difference of—of God with respect to the human being proves to be the norm for Kierkegaard's theological aesthetics, which distinguishes it from B's ethical aesthetics.

### *Theological Aesthetics*

The ethical view of life views *God as a legitimation of duty* and its concept of humanity is that of *ethical self-realization*. A Christian view of life—Christianity is not a doctrine but a communication of existence according to Kierkegaard—asserts *radical transcendence*, a radical difference between God and the human being, and holds that the *ideal itself* is not realized by the human being himself but is possible only through the *imitation* of Christ. There is no point of contact for faith such as B had in ethics (CUP 572-573). For my thesis that radical transcendence is the norm for Kierkegaard's theological ethics, I will first explore his view of the relationship between God and human beings and then show the consequences of this for his aesthetics.

There are gradations in the consciousness of the self. The human being is the measure for the "aesthetic and ethical selves" (SD: 79), whereas that is not so for the "theological self." In his struggle for his identity, the young man in *Repetition* searches for an integration that cannot produce the ethical self (R: 228-29). We do not have the truth in ourselves. According to the Christian faith, "the eternal truth has come into existence in time" (CUP: 209). The human being receives a new quality in confrontation with the God-man, Christ: he is a sinner (CUP: 583-584). This poses the qualitative distinction between God and human beings (SD: 126). As Climacus writes in *Philosophical Fragments*:

But then my soul is also gripped with new amazement—indeed it is filled with adoration, for it certainly would have been odd if it had been a human poem. Presumably it could occur to a human being to poetize himself in the likeness of the god or the god in the likeness of himself, but not to poetize that the god poetized himself in the likeness of a human being (PF 1985: 36).

Here the ethical position, which is interested only in its own reality, is transcended (CUP: 288). This concerns the "theological self," the self "directly

before God” (SD: 79). In *faith* the human being is based in God (SD 213). The human being is a sinner and must become a different person: “a person of a different quality ...a *new* person” (PF: 18). A transformation is needed that gives the imagination a new ideal of the self and, indeed, eternal happiness in relationship with God. The human being cannot realize that ideal himself and opens himself up in an attitude of humility for the grace of forgiveness.

If the difference between God and human beings is infinite, if Christ has entered the world as the Absolute (PC 1991: 62), then in Christianity *par excellence* one encounters the contradiction of existence and thus, according to Kierkegaard, the comic. We already saw in the ethical position how irony is a category of life. Human existence viewed from the Christian perspective is (dark) comic—the (dark) comic is that which rests on a contradiction. Kierkegaard points in all kinds of situations to the humorous aspect of life that depends on the contradiction in life. To give one arbitrary example, in part A of *Either/Or* the aesthete A gives a comic description of the human being that is a contradiction in the physical sense when moving in a forward direction:

The disproportion of my body is that my forelegs are too short. Like the hare from New Holland, I have very short forelegs but extremely long hind legs. Ordinarily, I sit very still; if I make a move, it is a tremendous leap, to the horror of all those to whom I am bound by the tender ties of kinship and friendship. (EO1: 38)

Here the inability to live in the present (the short forelegs of immediacy) and his compulsion to convert all life situations into reflection (long hind legs) is presented in a tragicomic way.

It is precisely in the Christian life that humor has a place (JP 2:1622; 1681)—precisely because the contradiction between time and eternity, the finite and the infinite comes to expression most clearly in Christianity in the God-man (JP 2, 229): the God-man in a manger and the God-man on the cross. If one is open to it, then humor is found in the *incognito* of the human being who stands on the threshold of the Christian faith (CUP: 499-501).

The aesthetic of Kierkegaard’s authorship emerged in, among other things, *Either/Or* through the use of a pseudonym and the literary form he chose. He chose this indirect form of communication by adapting himself to the reading public that would not immediately choose his religious position. Kierkegaard considered himself to be a Christian man of letters (poet) but understood that he himself fell short with respect to being a Christian. That is why he used the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) and *Practice in Christianity* (1850), with whom he himself had great affinity. The presentation there is also that of a man of letters because something is communicated that the author himself does not fulfill in his life.<sup>8</sup>

In the second part of *Either/Or* the issue is ethical communication, i.e. communicating a capability, an attitude to life. That is something other than communicating knowledge. Kierkegaard wrote in his diary that the

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<sup>8</sup> For convenience’s sake I will speak of Kierkegaard’s theological aesthetics, even though it is Anti-Climacus who articulates it.

communication of knowledge is direct communication but that communication of a capability is indirect communication: “all communication of capability ... is indirect communication” (JP 1, 282). Here Kierkegaard does introduce a nuance with respect to the Christian faith. The communication of the Christian faith also has to do with a communication of an ability, but this is not completely indirect but “direct-indirect.” The Christian-religious communication, namely, presupposes in the first instance a direct, doctrinal communication, such as, for example, the revelatory datum that the human being is sinful. When such a revelatory datum is known, the direct communication changes into an indirect one (JP:1, 288-89). On the one hand, it concerns a communication that comes entirely from without; on the other, it is a communication that expects a change in the person receiving it. That can happen only via a certain way of communicating. In *Practice in Christianity* the indirect communication is closely connected with Christology.

Christ the God-man, Anti-Climacus explains, is a *contradictory sign*. He is, to all appearances, an ordinary human being, but the contradiction lies in the fact that he is God. Therefore, the God-man cannot communicate himself directly.

We see that direct communication is an impossibility for the God-man, for inasmuch as he is the sign of contradiction he cannot communicate himself directly; to be a sign is already a term based on reflection, to say nothing of being the sign of contradiction. (PC 127, 142-43)

How can we understand the message that God took the form a servant out of love if that message could never occur in ourselves? The language of parable is necessary to see that. In *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus attempts to make the incomprehensible somewhat comprehensible by using a parable: the story of a king who loves a poor girl and wrestles with the question of how the inequality between them can be removed so that he can win her for himself. The king removes his cloak and disguises himself as a beggar. Climacus does remark that this analogy is a disanalogy: God’s form as a servant is his true form and not simply clothing one can take off like the king can. (PF: 39)

The communication of Christ concerns a situation in which the teacher is more important than the teaching. Such a communication entails *reduplication*. The communication does not happen by giving a theoretical explanation but by being reduplicated in the teacher because he exists in what he teaches. The message of the paradoxal unity of God and human being is reduplicated in the life of Christ, the communicator who announces that he is who he is. Reduplication concerns not only the teacher but also the student. The latter receives a communication without any objective guarantee of its truth and has to appropriate it in faith or reject it in irritation (Pattison1992: 90-91; ch. 3.). The communication summons one to act. It concerns the receiver appropriating the message existentially in his own acts in imitation of Christ.

The content of the Christian message demands the form of indirect communication. That obtains for each new translation of it. Concerning this Anti-Climacus says that the communicator must erase himself and then postulate opposites as a unity. That leads to the *double reflection* of the communication. There is not merely a general communication to which people should or should not be related, but that which is communicated should be applied to oneself. Banter and seriousness, for example, can be combined in such a way that a dialectical knot arises that the reader must unravel himself (PC: 133). In that way the indirect communication can be called an art:

Wherever the subjective is of importance in knowledge, and appropriation is therefore the main point, communication is a work of art, it is doubly reflected. (CUP: 79)

Apart from the indirect communication of the Christian message, radical transcendence is also the norm for the *imagination*. There is a limit to the imagination on the basis of the radical difference between God and the human being and the message of Christ as the God-man. We ourselves cannot conceive of the possibility that God offers people in Christ, as stated above. The relationship between *possibility* and *reality* has changed. New light is cast on the distinction discussed above between possibility (Romantic aesthetics) and reality (ethical aesthetics). In the ethical sphere reality is exalted to possibility as an ideal task, but in Christianity the possibility of God is higher than the reality of the human being, which is in fact despair if people realize that they are “nothing” in comparison with God.

At times the ingeniousness of the human imagination can extend to the point of creating possibility, but at last—that is, when it depends upon *faith*—then only this helps: that for God everything is possible. (SD: 39)

I will remark in passing that there is a similarity between the aesthetic and religious spheres. In both the possibility is higher than the reality—in the first the possibility of fantasy and in the second that of God. Trusting in God’s possibility is trusting God in time. In the encounter with Christ *reality is higher than the possibility one conceives of on one’s own*; it is the reality of another person—that of Christ as a historical individual in time—who offers the new possibilities of grace.

Although there is a limit to imagination, this does not entail that imagination is superfluous with respect to Christian faith. To the contrary, I already pointed to the use of the parable of the king and the girl to make the disanalogy between God and human beings somewhat comprehensible. Imagination must be used in service to appropriation, viewed as discipleship. It must not only evoke a possibility but also stimulate those to whom it is directed to action. It has to do with the reception of the product of the imagination.

*Response.* As we read in *Practice in Christianity*, a child is given pictures of Napoleon and William Tell from a kiosk, as well as a picture of

the crucified Christ (PC:174-79). The child does not understand the latter very well. He is told that Christ was a person of love and rose from the dead. When the child becomes older, he will want to fight those who crucified Jesus, if they are still alive. And becoming still older, he will want to suffer like Christ. He thus appropriates the old picture from his childhood in this way. "If the sight of this abased one *can* so move a person, can it not so move you also?" (PC 178). Anti-Climacus sketches another scenario in which a youth has formed an image of perfection in his imagination (PC 186-96). It is an idealized image that has no connection with an existence full of struggle. The youth identifies with it. But can it be perfection if suffering has no place in it? Anti-Climacus holds that the imagination, including that of the artist, cannot properly depict a perfection characterized by suffering (PC 187).

As B already remarked in *Either/Or*, Anti-Climacus also decides something similar here on the depiction of life in art. The image lacks the "reality of time and temporality" of everyday life. The youth's image of the idealized perfection does remain valid for him in a dialectical way because he gains an eye for another perfection that is characterized by suffering:

In a certain sense the youth's imagination has deceived him, but indeed, if he himself *wills*, it has not deceived him to his detriment, it has deceived him into the truth; by means of a deception it has, as it were, played him into God's hand .... Then comes a moment when everything becomes clear to him; he understands that that hope belonged to youth, he understands now that suffering cannot be avoided .... (PC 190-91)

The youth must want to depict the perfection of everyday life. The original image of perfection, radically changed by the figure of Christ, should actually be realized by people in discipleship (PC 190). As Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, the task of the poet in this case is "not to poetize the ideal but to be like it" (JP 6, 6632).

In *Christian Discourses* Kierkegaard presents a scene in which someone sits by an altar on a certain day, looking at a painting of the suffering Christ. Then there is a moment in which everything changes for him, a moment "when the picture blessedly turns around, as it were, when you will say to yourself, '... He [Christ] has indeed emptied it, the cup of suffering, because what he suffered he suffered only once, but he is victorious eternally'" (CD 1997: 103). The truth must be appropriated and that obtains also for the imagined truth of the painting on the altar on which an angel gives Christ the cup of suffering (Luke 22:43).

In the above examples of the child, the youth and the man or woman at the altar, the issue is constantly that of reception in the confrontation with the imagination. That is Kierkegaard's theological contribution to aesthetic response theory.

B used the concept of beauty for the ethical life; Anti-Climacus/Kierkegaard does not do that in his theological aesthetics. The reason for this is, it seems to me, the central place of the cross which he

cannot associate with beauty, as is indirectly apparent from the first two examples cited.

### *Art in Existential Aesthetics*

We may draw the following conclusions from the discussion above. The three key concepts in Kierkegaard's view of art are imagination, appropriation (response), and radical transcendence. As a central anthropological category, *imagination* ensures the necessary condition that art is important regardless of the stage of life (aesthetic, ethical, theological). Kierkegaard is not an iconoclast; it is not the image that is at issue but the use that is made of it (contra Pattison 1992: 155-88). Hermeneutically, the relationship between the work of art and the public has to do with *appropriation*, with *response*. *Radical transcendence* is the norm for the use of the imagination and art in the Christian religion and also determines the indirect communication by connecting it to Christology.

Kierkegaard employs the term *aesthetics* in a twofold way. He views aesthetics as *existential* aesthetics, which exists in different forms. The term "living poetically" receives its content in dependence on how life is viewed: Romantically, ethically or a Christian way. Although the term "living poetically" does not appear, as far as I know, in his works on religion, the matter itself is discussed: it concerns living poetically in a way characterized by living in discipleship to Jesus. Such a life entails religious suffering, by, among other things, dying to one's own aesthetic immediacy, but joy about the grace predominates (CD part II). This existential aesthetics also includes irony and humor. He also uses the term aesthetics in the sense of reflection on *aesthetic forms*, the study of elements of style and expression, such as composition, design and transfer. The issue of literary design, the indirect method of communication is present in both ethical and theological aesthetics, albeit in the latter as direct-indirect communication.

Kierkegaard sees art as *functional*, thus rejecting the notion of art as contemplative pleasure without any relationship to an existing person (CUP: 277). Material works of art serve life. Kierkegaard's use of material works of art in service to the Christian faith is limited. That has an aesthetic and a theological reason. There is a limit to representation. According to B in *Either/Or* and according to Kierkegaard, art and literature cannot express the time factor properly. This view is now a subject of discussion. Time in music and time in poetry and the literary narrative have unmistakably something extra in comparison to the time of daily life (see Begbie (2000) and Ricoeur (1984-1988)). Kierkegaard's theology views the revelation in Christ so exclusively that there is little room for searching for other locations of revelation. Art's only function is to serve the translation of the revelation in Christ. The view that art could be an independent dialogue partner for theology falls outside the perspective of this theological esthetics.

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## Abstract

Primarily because of recent studies (Gouwens, Erne, Walsh), there has been a revaluation of Kierkegaard's view of art and the aesthetic. This article distinguishes between the ethical aesthetics of the pseudonym B in *Either/Or* (1843) and Kierkegaard's theological aesthetics. It will show that, while imagination and appropriation are core concepts in both forms of

aesthetics, that Kierkegaard's view of radical transcendence—the qualitative distinction between God and human beings—is the norm only for his theological aesthetics. As a central anthropological category, *imagination* ensures the necessary condition that art is important regardless of the stage of life (aesthetic, ethical, religious). Kierkegaard is not an iconoclast; it is not the image that is at issue but the use to which it is put (contra Pattison). Hermeneutically, the relationship between the work of art and the public has to do with *appropriation*, with *response*. *Radical transcendence* is the norm for the use of the imagination and art in the Christian religion and also determines indirect communication by connecting it to Christology.

**Personalia** Prof. dr. Wessel Stoker teaches Aesthetics in the Faculties of Philosophy, Theology and Arts and Philosophy of Religion in the Faculty of Theology at the VU University Amsterdam.